Studying the New Media

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At the risk of caricaturing some serious research, we might say that there are a few standard ways for social scientists to analyze how ordinary people, non-professionals, the "public," are related to or involved with the arts. I want to speak particularly of two of these approaches, whose models have thoroughly dominated scholarly work.

The most common, perhaps, is a kind of behavioral accounting: how many people went to this museum or attended that symphony orchestra's concerts? The NEA has, over the years, paid for a lot of research of this kind. It's never quite clear what to make of the results. They generally show that not many people go to high art kinds of events, though more than you might think. But we don't know whether whatever number is presented is a "lot" or a "little," whether we should hope for "improvement" or be glad that as many as that are involved at all. We can monitor trends from year to year, but absolute numbers of participants don't have any obvious meaning of themselves.

A second kind of question seeks more intimate information, that will give us some idea of what good all this participation, in whatever amount, is. Are people who attend these events "getting anything" out of them? Is their capacity to enjoy artistic works increased? Do they have a more sophisticated outlook on life? Have they, at least, increased their cultural capital? This is generally thought of under the heading of "impact." What is the impact of an artistic experience on the person who has it? (Generally speaking, an "artistic experience" consists of what the first approach measures: visits to museums, attendance at musical or theatrical or dance events, or viewings of films, television programs and the like.)

Sometimes the "experience" whose effects we are interested in is expected to have a "bad" effect and, in fact, a lot more research is devoted to the potentially damaging effects of certain kinds of art works than to potential benefits. These studies typically do not find much influence of any kind, almost always fail to show that the medium in question is doing substantial harm, and are almost always involved in some sort of political movement to "do something about" the evils of the medium in question. The Payne Foundation studies done in the late 20s and early 30s provide a paradigmatic case of this approach at its worst.

Briefly (I rely here on Jowett et. al.'s (1996) investigation), a wealthy

Ohioan, Mrs. Bolton, whose husband was a Republican congressman (she was elected to his seat after his death and held it for many years), got interested in whether movies were good or bad for children and youth (bad, she thought) and wanted to do something about it. She got involved with a couple of 1920s style grant hustlers who had been propagandizing about the evil effects of the movies. One of them, a Mr. Seabury, believed in shouting and exposing, thinking that this was how you roused the "right people" to fight the evil. Seabury wasn't above a little anti-Semitism, hinting broadly about the "foreigners" who ran the movie business and how they couldn't be trusted to espouse all-American Protestant values. (The argument here is similar to Gusfield's (1963) analysis of the WCTU's supporters.)

The second hustler, Mr. Short, was a little smarter and said that shouting and decrying convinced no one and, besides, roused the movie industry to effective counteraction; the industry had already, in the 20s, shown some political muscle by defeating anti-movie legislation here and there, and it was clear they had the ticket buying public behind them. He thought you needed science to provide undeniable proof of the evil effects and persuaded Mrs. Bolton to fund such studies. And persuaded her further that these studies had to be "objective" and not betray any anti-industry bias, or else nothing could be accomplished. After they produced their results, which would certainly show how terrible movies were for kids, they would provide the basis for effective propaganda.

He found the people to do the studies mainly at the University of Chicago (Park, Blumer, Thurstone), but also at Yale (Mark May), Ohio State (W.W. Charters), and other well-known and well-regarded institutions. They also recruited Frederick Thrasher (a student of Park famous for his book on gangs) from NYU and, with him, Paul G. Cressey (another Park student, known for his book on taxi-dance halls). Various people dropped out over the five years (Park first, he had trips to the Far East to make) but in the end they produced eight or nine volumes (depending on how you count) collectively known as the Payne Fund Studies. Jowett et. al. got interested in part because the volume by Thrasher and Cressey, which promised to be interesting, was listed as part of the series but never appeared. What had happened to it? That led them to the various caches of papers that contained the story.

At a planning meeting, the researchers decided on research topics, according to their own interests. None of them seem to have thought that movies were really dangerous, although most of them apparently shared Short's anti-movie bias. They wanted to pursue their own research agendas and the Payne Find looked like a way to get some money to do it.

The results were not what the sponsors wanted. Movies had very little effect on anything--attitudes, sleep, etc.--psychologists could measure. The autobiographies Blumer collected from college students showed that people sometimes daydreamed about what they saw in the movies, especially about sex, but showed nothing at all about how moviegoing affected behavior. Mr. Short, of the foundation, was upset: not finding a bad effect of movies was not a result, you just hadn't found it yet, keep looking! He insisted that researchers, rather than say they hadn't found anything, just say that results were not yet conclusive. Some got angry, some just ignored him. Blumer produced some steamy excerpts from the autobiographies, but apparently he and Short thought they were too hot to put into print, though tame enough by our standards. Short threatened to not publish some of the "unproductive" studies in the series but was talked out of that.

We can construct a generalized version of this story: a sponsor wants to show that X is bad, scientists try to oblige, but can't find anything bad, with various outcomes, from non-publication to open disputes between sponsors and scientists. I believe that this happened in the case of the post-WWII panic over the effects of comic books, in the later pornography studies commissioned by the federal government, and is probably, in a modified way, the result of all the mountains of work on TV viewing and its impact on study habits, on sociability, on the propensity to engage in violence, on sexual arousal, and other untoward outcomes. I expect it will be the result of whatever work is done on the evils of computers and video games.

It is, of course, guaranteed to be the result. The idea that you could isolate a unique influence of such a thing as TV or movies or video games is absurd on the face of it. Social scientists, operating under the best conditions, have enough trouble demonstrating causal relations between any two variables--to tell the truth, I don't think they ever do, just maybe hint at it. Studying the effect of a communication medium which operates in the middle of ordinary social life, with all its complications, is not working under the best conditions, and the demonstration of cause and effect is, practically speaking, impossible. ("Cause and effect," as that idea is usually conceived, is just the wrong way to think about what social scientists can find out, but that's another story.)

Be that as it may, research is often funded by people who think they know what the answer is and just want to get some scientists to give them the evidence they're sure is there. When the paid for result isn't delivered, they get irritated and do something. What they do about it is variable, depending on the situation, who has the money, how venal the researchers in the area are (drug research is an area where you can always find

someone to produce whatever finding is needed), etc. It shows up, as it did in the Payne case, as an insistence by the sponsors that the scientists just keep on looking for the "right answer," and in a selective criticism of results (standards applied to "wrong" answers that are not applied to "right" answers). It shows up, too, in what is hinted at in this case, but not conclusively shown, the suppression of work that comes to the wrong conclusions

The "impact" paradigm, in other words, has never produced any solid findings about the good or bad effects of arts experiences. In this, it might be said, it reproduces the findings of generations of work on the effects of education, which has similarly failed to produce any stable findings about the efficacy of any particular way of imparting knowledge to young people.

 The "impact" approach improperly treats the public as an inert mass which doesn't do anything on its own, but rather just reacts to what is presented to it by powerful (usually commercial) organizations and the representatives of dominant social strata. In some ways, this is a very old theoretical position. The studies of the effects of movies treated moviegoers as passive receptacles who, bombarded by the movies' bad messages, would use them as models for their own lives and thus come to a bad end. The position got a theoretical boost from the Frankfort School, which developed the image of the mass society, whose puppet members reacted to what the rulers of the society gave them, material which supported and justified the ruling social and political regime.

 The image of an inert, passive mass audience is a gross empirical error. Dominique Pasquier's study (Pasquier 1999) of the audience of a popular French teenage television program contains a sobering, empirically based critique of this kind of research (pp. 215-223). She shows how young people who watched a popular TV program, made clear distinctions between the professional actors who portrayed the characters, the characters they portrayed, and the individual people whose profession was acting. They knew that the actors were not the characters they portrayed (even though they sometimes wrote letters to them as though they were), and that being an actor was only part of the life of the people whose work that was. These viewers used what they saw on the screen to explore imaginatively the possibilities of adult relationships, the ways young people can express and act on what they feel. Television helps them enter a "culture of sentiment," but is only part of their sentimental education.

 I needn't belabor the point that users of these materials are just that, users rather than recipients or victims. Much work needs to be done on what

viewers or users actually do with what they see and hear, work that (like Pasquier's) is solidly based on close observation of these processes rather than speculation.

Another area of needed work starts from the observation that ordinary folks do not simply receive messages from arts professionals. They also, in large numbers, use the same technical means professionals use to make their own "art" materials. To take a contemporary example, every Macintosh computer sold today contains everything you need to make your own movies and lots of people are doing that, digitally. In fact, people have made such home movies ever since inexpensive cameras were available in the 1930s (my father made thousands of feet of film of us kids) and Richard Chalfen has written extensively about them.

A similar example is the making of photographs by "ordinary people," who had been making them even before George Eastman created the Kodak system which made it easy enough for anyone to do without a lot of trouble. We usually attend mainly to the work of photojournalists, commercial photographers, or fine arts photographers. But most photographs are made by non-professionals (not even hobbyists) for their own and their famiies' consumption. A small but lively area of scholarly work by anthropologists, psychologists, and others, focusses on the analysis of family photo albums.

More recently, and more directly related to "digital," Constance Penley's book *NASA/TREK* (Penley 1997) describes the activities of a large group (large enough to hold their own conventions) of largely working class (straight) women who write homosexual pastiches of the Star Trek stories (Captain Kirk and Doctor Spock are the usual pair) and put them up on Internet sites for their own and anyone else's consumption. They used to xerox them, but found the digital version easier and cheaper.

I recently received a direct mail piece from XLibris, "a strategic partner of Random House," offering to publish my book at no cost to me, by making it available for on-demand sale. They say (I don't know where they get the numbers but I've seen similar estimates before) that some 500,000 books are written every year, 90% of them never being published. Digital technology will surely see more of them published, just as xerox technology and corner store binding raised the rate of publication in their day

This background (examples could be multiplied endlessly) is perhaps more than enough to show why I think that a major topic for research in this area ought to be the extensive use of digital resources by "ordinary people" to make "art" of some kind. I can think of several likely topics of

such research.

 One, most immediately related to digital technology, is the way people have taken to creating their own home pages and web sites. The major internet browsers contain all the materials and software you need to concoct a page that looks at least as good as a lot of other pages. Most of these probably do not go beyond a few cute remarks and some pictures of family, friends, and pets (though we don't know that and won't until someone actually looks), but surely many of them contain some sort of artistic expression: writing, visual art of all kinds (including digitized photography and video), music. It is worth knowing what kinds of work are being done, who is doing it, who is "accessing" it, what standards the artists use to create and judge their own work and the work of others, what kinds of art communities or worlds are growing up around all this, and all the other things that are relevant to the study of art of any kind.

 One of the first uses of any new communication technology has always been to make pornography. Photography was no sooner invented in the mid-19th century than people were using it to make and distribute dirty pictures. One of the first uses of Polaroid self-developing photographs, as soon as they became available, was to make the dirty pictures people had been afraid to take to a processing center to have developed and printed. Inexpensive video equipment has similarly been used for that purpose ever since it became available. So we ought to think seriously about studying the development of pornography on the Internet, and I'm not talking about the numerous sites from which you can get a glimpse of naughty pictures and a chance to view or buy more. I'm talking about the "amateurs" in this field, of whom there have always been a lot. (Even the "professionals" of pornography may be little more than amateurs with some obliging friends. Chuck Kleinhans's still unpublished study of foot fetish photographs shows just how amateurish most of these images were. Far from being the kind of fancy and blatantly "erotic" stuff the Mapplethorpe case accustomed us to, the pictures he worked with (the Kinsey Institute's complete file on the subject) were either ordinary snapshots or badly made studio photographs, with (for instance) ordinary parlor floor lamps, with their cords trailing through the background, for lighting.) The Web is filled with amateur porno sites, e.g., the cameras people put in their apartments and bedrooms and bathrooms and leave running all day and night. In other words, pornography is a major area of use of digital technology by ordinary folks.

 While I think there is a limit to what can be accomplished by sitting in front of a computer and surfing the net, that might be the appropriate method for at least some research on these topics. The web is filled with examples of proto art forms whose adepts have found each other and

created small networks of user/viewers which are the basis of potential new art worlds.

There's a very general point there. Social scientists tend to focus on professionals in the arts, and especially on those areas in which art has been, in one way or another, "commodified" (to use the up-to-date language). But enormous areas of important activity are then left out. A good source on this is a book by an ethnomusicologist, Ruth Finnegan (Finnegan 1989), called "The Hidden Musicians," which just describes all the kinds of music that were made in a British city of 200,00. It's astounding how much there is, most of it consisting of amateur singing groups or ethnic music groups or garage bands, etc., etc. This sort of thing has been magnified by the democratization of distribution systems made possible by digital technology (e.g., ease of publication). (Bourdieu's early book on photography (Bourdieu 1990) has a little on this too.) Hermano Vianna's study of the world of funk music in Rio de Janeiro (Vianna 1988) is another good example of a large musical enterprise which remained completely hidden from professional observers. On his account, something like a million (almost entirely poor) people attended public events where funk music was played every weekend in the greater Rio area. Yet "no one"--no critic, no journalist, no social scientist--was even aware of the existence of the phenomenon until he published his book.

One way of studying these phenomena might be through the use of the notion of a "world" of activity, consisting all the people whose actions contribute in any way to the resulting output of art or whatever it might be called. I'll leave as a final example the world of hypertext fiction (Becker 1995), which began long ago in the literary experiments of novelists like Borges or Cortazar or Perec and developed rapidly when computer technology made implementation of the basic idea easier. This example, which I have developed elsewhere at length, shows how the activities of a variety of people coming from a variety of professional and amateur backgrounds can produce what amounts to a new art form, complete with all the institutional paraphernalia we ordinarily associate with that.

Another important approach is to follow Finnegan's example and make a complete census of all the people who are actually engaging in the activity we are interested in--e.g., creating digital imagery--and seeing how all those activities influence and affect one another, without succumbing to the high-brow (and thorougholy unscientific) bias which leads us to rule out much of the relevant activity as unimportant or inconsequential.

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